

Mark 1: 9-15

Pymble 18.2.18

3 Church Temptations

As I mentioned last week,
the interpretive lens in my preaching
in the coming weeks will be:
what does the faithful church in the modern world look like?
And specifically in our context, what might a modern church look like
as it enters a period of change?
One thing is for sure:
whenever a congregation seeks to change its direction
or modify some of its long-term programs, temptations abound!
Temptations to give up, to go back,
to despair, to become defensive,
maybe even to lose what's valuable in our traditions...
So Mark's story about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness
is a timely one for us.

This morning I will offer a few brief words of introduction
before suggesting 3 temptations modern churches face.
And to ensure it isn't simply a "Steve's list of Church problems",
I will try to link it with Jesus' thinking and outlook in Mark's gospel.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, who also include a temptation story,
Mark's temptation account is sparse and brief...

*"[Jesus] was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan,
and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."*

That's all the detail we get.
For Mark, the *fact* of this testing is more important than the *particulars* of it.
We get no information about his fasting and hunger
and none of the detailed conversations between Jesus and Satan.
Nevertheless, the context of the temptation
and the few details that are given, reveal a great deal.

For example, the setting is very significant.
The *wilderness* was the place in the Old Testament
where God was surprisingly found.
Surprisingly, because it was widely thought the wilderness
was a godforsaken place – linked to the chaos of pre-creation –
and yet, again and again, when people despaired, even of life itself,
they discovered God's encouraging presence in the wilderness.

Think of the Hebrew people after coming out of Egypt,
or of Elijah wanting to die after his life was threatened –
stories that also incorporate the “40” motif, that Mark includes.
The important thing to note here
is that the wilderness – this terrifying place of wild beasts –
is a place where faith and identity are forged and tested.
This was Jesus’ experience.

And so with an understanding that Jesus was tested;
that he was tempted to choose another way,
what tests might our congregation face
as it seeks to chart a new future?

I think one of the great temptations we face in the Western Church
and especially on the North Shore of Sydney
is to forget that we are engaged in something of a conflict:
to overlook the fact that there are some clear cultural clashes
between how our world is currently arranged, and how God would have it.
More than any of the gospels,
Mark presents Jesus as engaged in a cosmic battle
between God and the forces of darkness –
casting out demons and “binding the strongman” (a term used only in Mark) –
in order that the Kingdom might be offered to people.
And while we might not wish to own in a literal way
that there are spiritual powers manipulating the levers
of cultural norms and the spirit of the age,
still we recognize that there are some fundamental differences
between today’s dominant social values
and Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom.
I think we see these differences in issues like
where we find ultimate security (is it with God or in money?)
who is my neighbour (is it just those like me or is it any in need?)
and perhaps our fixation on individualism at the cost of community.

And perhaps because we are largely comfortable in this part of the world
and maybe because this world has served us quite well,
we are tempted to see nothing sinister
in the values of our age.
But to be so accepting and accommodating of our culture
is to forget that we are called to be *in the world but not of the world*;
it is to overlook that Christ’s way is likened to a *narrow path*
in amongst a wide path that leads to destruction
and it is to ignore that our faith is so counter-cultural
we are told *this world is not our home*.

Being comfortable is a great aid to apathy and inertia,

so the temptation becomes to stay where we are;
to imagine that faith sits quite comfortably
alongside the social values of our age
and doesn't demand any great choice from us.
But that is not how Jesus views our relationship with our culture.
Little wonder that a prayer-phrase
that has recently caught the imagination of many is
for God not only to "comfort the afflicted,
but also to afflict the comfortable."

The second great temptation of the modern church
is to imagine that our salvation lies in the past.
There are many aspects to this:
One of the most common is to look back to the church of yesteryear
and imagine we can recreate it.
*If we could just get the fellowship groups going again,
if we could just have a minister like we did when the church was full...
if we could only go back to how it used to be.*
Nostalgia for the past is a powerful force
but while it might be enjoyable to bathe in its glow for a while,
it is not a useful tool to engage a changing landscape.
We can learn from the past, but there is never any chance
of recreating an imagined golden era.

A similar form of looking to the past
is losing one's nerve once setting out on a new path.
The Hebrew people are the great exemplars of this.
They had wanted nothing more
than freedom from their harsh Egyptian slave masters,
but no sooner had they gained their liberation,
and a few difficulties arose,
than they started longing to go back to Egypt;
and they even attacked Moses for bringing them out into the desert.
*Better the pain that we knew in slavery
than this uncertainty we have in our freedom,* they may have said.

Many declining congregations across our Synod,
even when they get down to 10 or 15 members,
still have trouble accepting that they need to amalgamate
with another congregation or to make some radical changes.
And instead they imagine they can regain the glory days
by doing exactly what they've been doing for 50 years.

It takes courage and faith
to make some changes and break from the past,

and it also takes courage and faith to stay the course when things get a bit tough.

A third significant temptation for the church is to measure the church's value on society's ideas of success, instead of on **love and service**.

We do not exist to bring glory to ourselves;

and we are not here to be a "successful church".

You might note I've been using the adjective *faithful*,

rather than *successful* because success-language usually makes

us think in terms of budget surpluses,

worship numbers on Sunday mornings,

and a set of dazzling programs.

But no, we are here primarily to serve.

Like Peter's mother-in-law who served Jesus

when she was healed,

as an example of how we are all to respond to God's grace;

and like Jesus himself who says later in this gospel,

that he did not come to be served, but to serve.

Service is the church's mantra.

Loving our neighbour as we love ourselves,

and serving the 'least of these'.

I mean if I asked you what you are most proud of in our church life,

I'm guessing most of you would point to the areas where we serve others –

the visits to Enngonia, the clothing sent to Griffith,

the ongoing support of Exodus and so on.

We are most satisfied with those areas

where we are offering something tangible to others who are in need.

And that is how it ought to be.

Recently, Turramurra congregation, encouraged by their new minister,

handed out bottled water to commuters coming off the train station.

Actually the minister had asked the children in the service

to come up with an idea to share their faith and this was their idea.

And with very little encouragement it came to fruition,

handing out 350 bottles to commuters on one of those very hot days

where it had been about 40 degrees.

An act like that doesn't automatically make the church a servant

but it is a symbol of them wanting to serve rather than be served.

And the little church at South Turramurra, St Andrews,

is using the fact that the Minister has

a child with a disability,

to serve their community by running a playgroup for children with disabilities

and other respite programs for parents.

Again, like last week, I am not advocating we copy any of these examples; they are simply illustrations of how the church can avoid the temptations of existing for its own self.

Perhaps you can come up with other modern temptations for faithful churches,

but these are my offerings for us as we venture into change territory.

So let us accept that our faith is counter cultural in many ways;

let us not imagine we can go back to the past;

and let us always measure our success primarily

by how we serve the needs of others.